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Messi prefers not to over-think risk on infection as La Liga return looms





SATURDAY 16 MAY 2020

German football steps into the unknown on its return to action

In today's stand-out game, Borussia Dortmund host Schalke in the 156th Ruhr derby. For the first time in the fixture's 95-year history it will be played without spectators, when 82,000 passionate fans would normally pack out Signal Iduna Park.

AFP – BERLIN

The German Bundesliga takes the spotlight today as the first top European league to resume during the coronavirus pandemic, with one coach admitting it feels like "flying blind".

After a two-month break, the German Football League (DFL) had to submit an extraordinarily detailed plan of measures to gain approval for the restart from Chancellor Angela Merkel and the 16 state leaders.

With leagues still suspended in England, Italy and Spain, and France having already decided to end its season, the Bundesliga this weekend will have the footballing world's attention to itself.

Bundesliga CEO Christian Seifert has warned the matches, played behind closed doors, will "look and feel different".

The shouts of players will echo around the empty stands and goals will have to be celebrated with elbow or foot taps because players have been ordered to avoid hugs or handshakes.

Substitutes and coaches on the bench must wear protective masks.

Match fitness is a concern as teams only started training sessions for the whole squad last week having previously worked in small groups.

"I'm calling it 'flying blind'," Hertha Berlin coach Bruno Labbadia said.

"With so few days of preparation, it's impossible to say where we stand."

With no crowd noise to mask the odd swear word, RB Leipzig coach Julian Nagelsmann admitted he will have to curb his language.

"I will try to behave in a socially acceptable way in the (coaching) zone," he said.

In today's stand-out game, Borussia Dortmund host Schalke in the 156th Ruhr derby. For the first time in the fixture's 95-year history it will be played without spectators, when 82,000 passionate fans would normally pack out Signal Iduna Park.

Tomorrow, Union Berlin host leaders Bayern Munich, who are four points clear in their bid for an eighth straight title, at their compact Alten Foersterei stadium.

"When I see the emotions we have developed over the last few days, even in a training game, it shows our greed for regular competition," Bayern forward Thomas Mueller wrote on *LinkedIn*.

Union will have to do without the boisterous home crowd who helped them beat previous leaders Dortmund, and Borussia Moenchengladbach, in east Berlin this season.

The clubs want to finish the nine remaining rounds of matches by June 30 in order to claim around €300m ($324m) in television money.

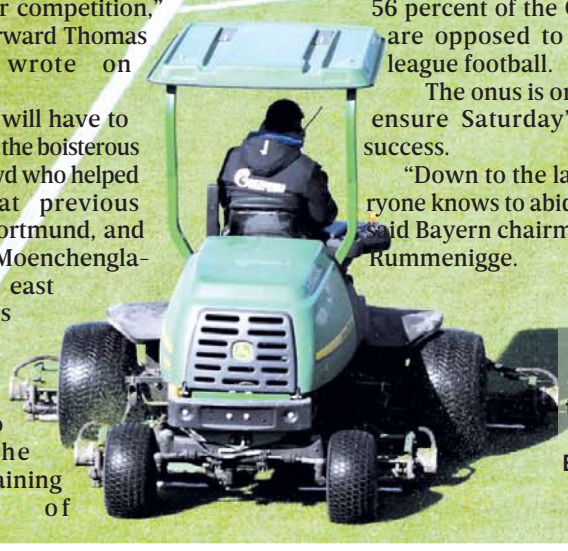
To curb the risk of infection, players and staff are being tested regularly and each club has been in a week-long quarantine.

The coronavirus has claimed over 7,800 lives in Germany, although the death rate is far lower than other major European countries.

A poll by broadcaster ARD showed 56 percent of the German public are opposed to the return of league football.

The onus is on the players to ensure Saturday's restart is a success.

"Down to the last player, everyone knows to abide by the rules," said Bayern chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge.



A lawnmower drives on the pitch at the training grounds of German Bundesliga team FC Schalke 04, yesterday.

TEAM QATAR

QOC extends suspension of sport activities until end of May

QNA – DOHA

Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) announced the extension of suspending all local sports activities until the end of May.

The Olympic Committee pointed out that the decision comes in line with the preventive measures taken by the State of Qatar to limit the spread of the novel Coronavirus (Covid-19), and in the interest of the safety of all athletes and participants. QOC had earlier announced the suspension of all local sports activities until May 14. The Qatar Football Association also announced that it has decided to stop all competitions until May 31 to support the measures taken by the state to limit the spread of COVID-19 in order to ensure the safety of everyone.

Star defender recalls special moment in video chat

Qatar's Hassan 'surprised' to beat the odds on way to top AFC award

CHINTHANA WASALA
THE PENINSULA

Qatari star Abdelkarim Hassan said winning the AFC Player of the Year Award in 2018 was a great motivation for him, saying winning the accolade which is rare for a defender makes him proud.

During an ***Instagram Live*** session on Qatar Olympic Committee's social media platform, the tall defender cherished his Asian Player of the Year Award winning moment.

In a major honour for Qatar and Qatari club football, Hassan was declared the AFC Player of the Year at the Asian football body's annual awards gala in Muscat in 2018.

"I received the news and I was surprised because I am a defender. Usually it is difficult for any defender to win such an award. But I am proud of this achievement and It was surely a great motivation for me," the 6'2" tall Hassan said while recalling his early days as a player.

"I joined Al Sadd junior team in 2002 and in 2006 I entered the academy for both studies and sport, and then graduated in 2011. I joined the first team of Al Sadd Club at the age of 16."

"I was present in the stands during the final of the AFC Champions League 2011 where Al Sadd went on to clinch the title. I participated with the national team in the Gulf Cup in Riyadh and the Asian Cup in the Emirates, the two most important occasions for which I had the honour to participate," Hassan said.

Hassan, who had a short stint at Belgian club KAS Eupen in 2017, said the appearance at the European club did little in helping him.

"I had a passion for professionalism. I was hoping to be in a club participating in the Champions League and not a club competing for survival. So the club did not help me in showing my best, and unfortunately I did not benefit from this experience," he said.

Hassan said he is a fan of his former team-mate and Al Sailiya left back Nadir Belhaj and considers him as his role model.

"Belhadj is my role model. I was always eager to learn from Belhaj who helped me a lot in the beginning of my professional career. He taught me a lot of things."

Hassan said he takes responsibility for Al Sadd's loss against Al Hilal during last season's AFC Champion's League semi-finals. Al Sadd went down fighting to the Saudi Arabian club 1-4 in the first-leg semi-final after making a solid start.

Hassan was shown a red card in the 35th minute and the damage cost Al Sadd dearly. The Wolves won the return leg 4-2 but the eventual champions Al Hilal advanced on goal difference.

"Certainly the atmosphere was tense in that game. I bear responsibility, but we are a team and it does not mean that we lost because Abdelkarim's expulsion. It is true that I made a mistake and I learned from my mistake. I was saddened from the trend which blamed me for the loss following the match," he said.

Speaking about the current lot of players, Hassan rated his Al Sadd and Qatar team-mate Saad Al Sheeb as the best goalkeeper in the Qatar Stars League (QSL).

"Saad Al Sheeb is the best. But this season, Fahd Younis and Mahmud Ibrahim Abunad of Al Arabi also performing exceptionally well," Hassan said.

"(Yacine) Brahimi and Akram Afif are the top players in the QSL right now" he added.

Asked who is the best footballer Qatar has ever produced, Hassan's answer was Khalfan Ibrahim.

"I think Khalfan Ibrahim is the best because Khalfan was totally dependent on him alone, whether in the national team or the club. He won a number of honours at the highest level. He is also the best player I have played with in the club and in the team and I believe he is one of the best Arab players ever. I think (Manchester City's Algerian star Riyad) Mehrez is the best Arab player ever. It's true Mohamed Salah has become a legend with Liverpool, but I still think Mehrez is the best," Hassan said.

The Qatari star said that he is proud to be volunteering under the current circumstances due to the coronavirus, and he had carried out some sports training for his brothers during in quarantine.

With all football action on halt due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Hassan said he not training at the club these days.

"Currently, I train daily with the national team, not Al Sadd, while adhering to the COVID-19 preventive measures," Hassan said.



Abdelkarim Hassan

"Belhadj is my role model. I was always eager to learn from Belhaj who helped me a lot in the beginning of my professional career. He taught me a lot of things.

Saad Al Sheeb is the best (goalkeeper). But this season, Fahd Younis and Mahmud Ibrahim Abunad of Al Arabi also performing exceptionally well. (Yacine) Brahimi and Akram Afif are the top players in the QSL right now: *Abdelkarim Hassan*

ATP cancels eight more events and WTA scratches four

AFP – PARIS

The coronavirus shutdown of top-level tennis was extended yesterday when the ATP cancelled eight tournaments and the WTA eliminated four.

Wimbledon, which was due to end on July 12, had already been scratched as had the Olympics where the tennis was due to run from July 25 to August 2.

The ATP, which runs the men's tour, will not now host an event until the first week of August in Washington.

They have cancelled July tournaments in Bastad, Hamburg and Newport, Rhode Island, as well as Los Cabos in Mexico, Gstaad, Umag, Atlanta and Kitzbuehel in Austria.

"The extended suspension also applies to the ATP Challenger Tour and to men's events on the ITF World Tennis Tour," said the ATP on its web site.

A WTA spokesperson said that its events in Bastad, Lausanne, Bucharest and Jurmala in Latvia "will not be held, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic".

However, WTA tournaments in Palermo, from July 20-26, and in Karlsruhe, Germany, July 28 to August 2, are still on, for now.

"A decision regarding the dates in which Karlsruhe and Palermo may be played along with further updates to the WTA calendar will be made in June," said the WTA statement.

The ATP also said it would make a decision on further cancellations next month.

"Tournaments taking place from August 1, 2020 onwards are still planning to proceed," said its statement.

"A further update on the ATP Tour calendar is expected in mid-June." The fate of the US Open in New York is also expected to be decided in mid-June.

"Just like tennis fans, players and tournament hosts all over the world, we share in the disappointment the Tour continues to be affected in this way," said Andrea Gaudenzi, the ATP Chairman.

"We continue to assess all of our options in an effort to resume the Tour as soon as it is safe to do so, including the feasibility of rescheduling events later in the season." The WTA spokesperson echoed the sentiment.

"We regret this is the case but will continue to be guided by medical experts for when it is safe and possible to return to WTA competition. We continue to monitor the situation closely and are hopeful to be back on the court as soon as possible."

No return for Lorenzo in 2020 as MotoGP cancels wild cards



REUTERS – LONDON

Former MotoGP world champion Jorge Lorenzo **(pictured)** will not have a chance to race this season after series organisers ruled out wild card entries due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The season has yet to start for motorcycling's top category but there are hopes of opening with two races on successive weekends in July without spectators at the Jerez circuit in southern Spain.

Organisers expect around 1,600 people at such races, with manufacturer teams limited to 40 while independent MotoGP outfits must manage with 25. Those in Moto2, one rung down, would be allowed 20 and Moto3 a maximum of 15. "The likelihood of any events in 2020 needing to be held behind closed doors means that it is necessary to keep participant numbers to the absolute minimum," MotoGP said in a statement yesterday.

"It is also important to allow optimum utilisation of pit box space by the contracted teams. The Commission have therefore decided that wild card entries, in all classes, will be suspended for the 2020 season."

Yamaha had planned for retired triple MotoGP champion Lorenzo to race as a wild card at his home Catalan Grand Prix in June, but that race is one of several to have been postponed.

Lorenzo, 33, signed as a Yamaha factory test rider in January.

Wild cards are used to give race experience to young prospects as well as for established test riders in their home races.

French event could be held in October

AFP – PARIS

The French MotoGP, originally scheduled to take place this weekend but postponed due to the coronavirus could be held in October, the race's organiser said yesterday.

"We continue to work towards being able to organise the Grand Prix de France 2020 in the first half of October," Claude Michy said in a statement.

MotoGP promoter Dorna and the International Motorcycling Federation (FIM) are working on a new schedule for the 2020 season which could begin on July 19 in Jerez in Spain, with a race behind closed doors and with a reduced number of people in the paddock.

Organisers are planning on between 10-12 races in Europe before the end of November, then races outside Europe if possible.

The first 11 races of the 2020 MotoGP season have either been postponed or cancelled, while the Moto2 and Moto3 categories haven't raced since Qatar in March.

Al Khelaifi placed ninth in virtual ETCC race

QNA – DOHA

Qatari driver Abdullah Al Khelaifi achieved a good result in the second round of the online edition of the European Touring Car Championship (ETCC), which was held at Red Bull Circuit with the participation of 25 drivers.

Al Khelaifi made a strong performance driving the Seat Leon Cupra car in the second round competitions.

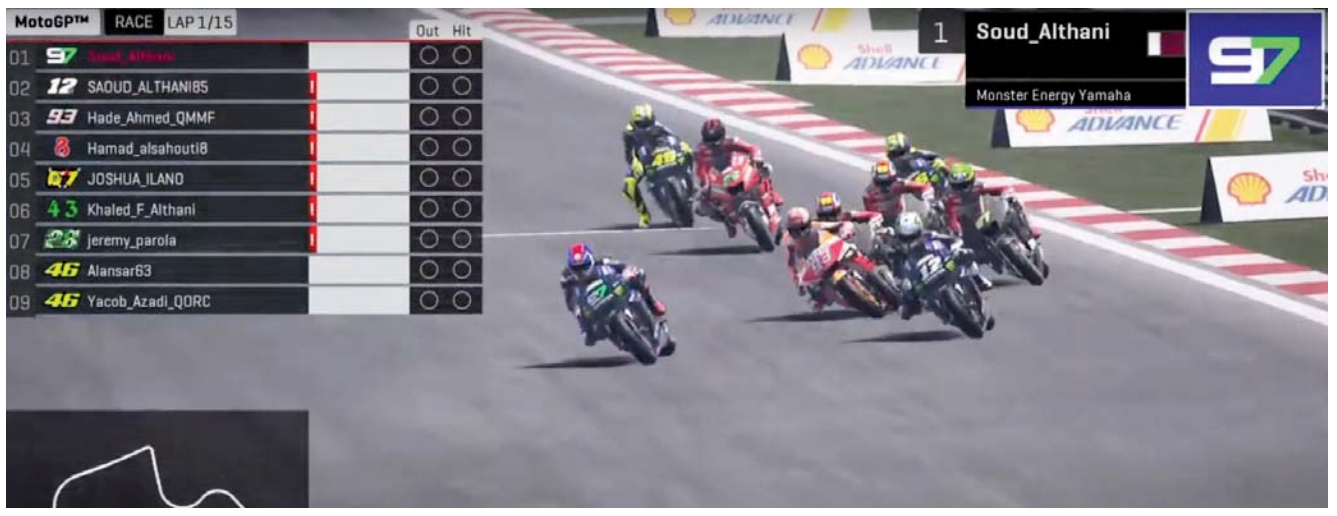
The Qatari driver managed to perform well in the first race and ended up in the ninth place after a strong competition, then returned and appeared at the same level in the second and final race and finished in the same position.

The participation in the ETCC is intended for drivers who participated in last season's championship, as well as those who recently registered for the 2020 season.

In view of the delay in the start of the actual championship competitions due to the spread of the novel Coronavirus (Covid-19), the organising committee decided to compete remotely with the participation of the actual competitors of the championship.

Al Khelaifi, who represents the Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation in the championship, expressed his happiness at taking part in this experience in light of the stopping of the actual competition all over the world.

Al Khelaifi said that his participation in the second round is his first in the championship after his absence from competing in the first round due to a technical problem in the transmission process, which was resolved in this round.



QORC: Soud, Saeed win as final grid confirmed

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Qatar's Soud Al Thani dominated the proceedings as top rider Saeed Al Sulaiti bounced back to clinched his second win in the series to book a place in the final of the Qatar Online Racing Championship (QORC) MotoGP series on Thursday.

Soud clinched his third consecutive Group A win in the qualifying rounds to head into the final round with a points tally of 120. Hade Ahmed won the second place in Thursday's Group B race while Hamad Al Sahouti finished third in the event which took place on a virtual Sepang Circuit in Malaysia.

They will be joined by Jeremy Parola, Joshua Ilano, and Yacob Azadi in the final race. Khaled Al Thani made it to the top 7 after finishing the three rounds with 84 points, but will not participate in the final due to personal reasons. His place will go to Saoud Al Thani who finished with 80 points.

In Group B, the Qatar Superstock 600 champion, Saeed topped the 11-rider field as he added 40 more points to take his tally to 106 with two wins.

Saeed faced technical issues and lost connection to the online game in the second round which was held on Tuesday, but was later awarded 26 points due to the fact that he finished on top in the qualifying round.

Kuwaiti rider Ali Ahmed who finished third in Thursday's round, has also collected a total of 106 points and will be heading for the final race along with five others from his group.

Khalid Al Maraghi won the second place in Group B today as he took his tally to 100 points.

Abdulla Al Qubaisi, Mohamad Al Zaidan, Saad Al Harqan and Jassim Al Thani are the rest of the riders who will be joining a grid of 14 in the final race.

The series, played on PlayStation 4 platform of MotoGP 19 game, is organised by the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF).

QATAR ONLINE RACING CHAMPIONSHIP CLASSIFICATION

GROUP A

RANK	RIDER	R1	R2	R3	TOTAL
1	Soud Al Thani	40	40	40	120
2	Hade Ahmed	33	36	36	105
3	Jeremy Parola	36	33	29	98
4	Hamad Al Sahouti	30	29	33	92
5	Joshua Ilano	31	31	30	92
6	Khaled Al Thani	29	27	28	84
7	Yacob Azadi	28	26	26	80
8	Saoud Al Thani	0	30	31	61
9	Ali Al Ansari	0	28	27	55
10	Alexander Qabazard	27	0	0	27

GROUP B

1	Saeed Al Sulaiti	40	26	40	106
2	Ali Ahmed	33	40	33	106
3	Khalid Al Maraghi	31	33	36	100
4	Abdulla Al Qubaisi	30	36	31	97
5	Mohamad Al Zaidan	36	31	29	96
6	Saad Al Harqan	28	30	28	86
7	Jassim Al Thani	26	28	30	84
8	Martin Robinson	27	29	27	83
9	Hamad Al Sulaiti	9	25	0	54
10	Antoine Baaklini	25	27	0	52
11	Abdulla Al Abassi	0	0	0	0

Formula One grid in 2021: What we know so far

AFP – PARIS

With Carlos Sainz moving to Ferrari and Daniel Ricciardo heading for McLaren, AFP looks at how the grid in the 2021 Formula One world championship is shaping up.

MERCEDES

Six-time world champion Lewis Hamilton is under contract until the end of 2020 and has made no secret of his intention to stay with the sport's top team as he targets Michael Schumacher's record of seven titles. His teammate Valtteri Bottas is also signed up until the end of this year. However, the 30-year-old Finn is believed to be under pressure from highly-rated Williams driver George Russell, a product of the Mercedes young drivers scheme. Mercedes team boss Toto Wolff has said he wants to keep Hamilton and Bottas together. But he also admitted that he cannot "ignore" the fact that four-time world champion Sebastian Vettel has already announced he is leaving Ferrari at the end of this season.

FERRARI

Monaco's Charles Leclerc, just 22, has a deal with the Italian giants until 2024 and with Vettel on his way out, will expect to see the team built around him. In 2021, his new teammate will be Spain's Carlos Sainz, three years his senior, who will leave McLaren.

RED BULL (Honda engine)

Max Verstappen, 22, is on the books until 2023. Teammate Alexander Albon has a contract until the end of this season having been promoted from the Red Bull sister team. He needs to keep making an impression, especially with Vettel, a former Red Bull star, a free agent

RENAULT

French driver Esteban Ocon has a deal until the end of 2021 with an option for 2022. But who will be the 22-year-old's teammate after the departure of Ricciardo to McLaren? There is widespread speculation that 38-year-old Fernando Alonso, who won his two world titles with Renault in 2005 and 2006, could be poised for a sensational return to F1 having retired in 2018.

MCLAREN
(Mercedes engine from 2021)

30-year-old Ricciardo has penned a "multi-year" deal with McLaren from 2021 where he will race alongside Britain's Lando Norris, 10 years the Australian's junior.

ALFA ROMEO (Ferrari engine)

Former world champion Kimi Raikkonen, 40, and Italian teammate Antonio Giovinazzi both have confirmed drives until the end of 2020.

HAAS (Ferrari engine)

Denmark's Kevin Magnussen and Frenchman Romain Grosjean have deals until the end of this year. However, their futures are on the line following a string of disappointing results and clashes between the two on the track.

WILLIAMS (Mercedes engine)

Russell's deal runs to the end of 2021 but he has been heavily linked with a move to Mercedes. His teammate for 2020 is Canada's Nicholas Latifi, who will be the only rookie on the grid when the season finally begins.

Silverstone agrees terms with F1 for back-to-back races

REUTERS – LONDON

Formula One and Silverstone have agreed terms for two races without spectators at the circuit this season, subject to government approval, the track's managing director Stuart Pringle said yesterday.

The British Grand Prix, a home race for Mercedes' six times world champion Lewis Hamilton as well as seven of the 10 teams, is scheduled for July 19 but that could change as the sport redraws a calendar ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Formula One is seeking to make up the numbers after three races, including this month's traditional Monaco showcase, were cancelled and seven others postponed.

More are also looking unlikely to happen due to travel restrictions and measures to combat the spread of the coronavirus.

"We're not talking dates because F1 are still trying to knit their calendar together and there seems to be a certain amount of flexibility," Pringle told Reuters.



Drivers taking part in thye Formula One British Grand Prix at the Silverstone Circuit in Silverstone, Britain in this July 14, 2019 file photo.

He said both parties were happy with the agreement, without giving details.

Media reports earlier in the week had suggested the sides were arguing over money, with the hosting fee waived but Silverstone unable to sell tickets and still seeking a payment to cover costs.

The British Grand Prix was the best attended race on the calendar last year, with 351,000 people over the three days and 141,000 on race Sunday.

The races would be back-to-back at the circuit that is celebrating the 70th anniversary of hosting the first Formula One world championship race.

Pringle said there was still no presumption that any race would happen, however.

The British government has said it plans to introduce a quarantine period for most people arriving from abroad, which could make Formula One's plans for Silverstone almost impossible unless an exemption is granted to teams.

The sport is planning to start the season with two races in Austria in early July, also behind closed doors and in carefully controlled medical conditions with teams flying in on charter flights and remaining isolated.

"It is very much subject to government approval. If the government aren't happy, it won't happen," said Pringle of the Silverstone races.

Spa given green light for Belgian GP without spectators

REUTERS – LONDON

The Belgian Formula One Grand Prix, scheduled for the end of August but threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic, can go ahead without spectators, regional authorities said yesterday.

The Formula One season has yet to start, with three races cancelled and seven postponed, but series organisers are planning to get going in July with two races behind closed doors in Austria.

The government has said no sports or cultural events can take place before June 30 but sports clubs can resume training in the presence of a coach and with no more than 20 people present from May 18.

"The Belgian Grand Prix can be held behind closed doors, as well as all the necessary prior training," the Belgian region of Wallonia said in a statement.

The Spa-Francorchamps circuit said on its website that it had implemented health and prevention measures to comply with directives.

Formula One has yet to publish a revised calendar, with commercial rights holders Liberty Media aiming for a reduced schedule of 15-18 races running into December and possibly even January.

Belgium was scheduled for Aug. 30 on the original calendar.

Djokovic confident he will claim Grand Slam record

REUTERS — NEW YORK

Novak Djokovic **(pictured)** believes he will win the most Grand Slam titles and become the longest-reigning world number one by the time he retires, the 32-year-old Serb said in an interview.

The current world number one has 17 Grand Slam titles to his name - two behind Rafa Nadal and three fewer than Roger Federer - and said he has no doubt in his ability to overtake the other members of the so-called 'Big Three.'

"I'm always very confident in myself," he said in an interview on In Depth with Graham Bensinger.

"I believe I can win the most slams and break the record for longest number one. Those are definitely my clear goals."

Djokovic was in imperious form before the novel coronavirus pandemic brought the circuit to a halt in early March.

I don't believe in limits. I think limits are only illusions of your ego or your mind: Novak Djokovic

He lifted the ATP Cup with Serbia, won an eighth Australian Open title and then completed a fifth triumph at the Dubai Tennis Championships, extending his unbeaten run to 21.

Swiss great Federer also owns the record for total number of weeks at number one, with 310, and consecutive weeks at the top position, with 237, compared with Djokovic's 282 and 122.

Federer turns 39 in August and Djokovic said he could envision himself still playing at 40.

"I don't believe in limits. I think limits are only illusions of your ego or your mind," he said.

It wasn't too long ago that Djokovic had an entirely different outlook on the game.

After falling in straight sets to unseeded Benoit Paire at the Miami Open in 2018, his wife, Jelena, said he was ready to hang up the racquet.

"He said to me that he's quitting and that's the truth," she said in the interview.

"He lost in Miami. It was a terrible loss. And then he just, you know, gathered all of us and said, 'You know guys, I'm done. And I was like, 'What?' And he goes like, 'Yeah.' He said, 'Edoardo, you can speak with my sponsors. I want to be clear with them. I don't know if I'm stopping for six months, a year or forever.'"

Djokovic did not go through with his retirement plans and bounced back to triumph at Wimbledon that July.

In the wide-ranging interview, Djokovic also discussed past struggles with his health, his marriage and surviving the bombings in his native Serbia in 1999.

The full interview will air in the US this weekend on local affiliates, and on international and regional sports networks next week.

Meanwhile, former world number one Naomi Osaka has admitted having "a lot of regrets" and said she's soul-searching during the coronavirus lockdown for ways to become more assertive.



The 22-year-old Japanese, who stormed to prominence by winning back-to-back Grand Slam titles at the 2018 US Open and 2019 Australian Open, said she believed her shyness was holding her back.

"I think people know me as being really shy," she told *CNN* Sport from her home in Los Angeles.

"I want to also take the quarantine time to just think about everything, and for me, I have a lot of regrets before I go to sleep.

"And most of the regrets is due to (the fact) that I don't speak out about what I'm thinking."

"There's a lot of times where I see myself in situations where I could have put my input in, but instead I've held my tongue and things kept moving in a way that I didn't really enjoy," she said.

India fine with playing entire Aussie series in Adelaide, says BCCI official

REUTERS — NEW DELHI

India captain Virat Kohli and his team will be open to playing the entire Test series against Australia in a 'bio-secure' Adelaide Oval if the situation demands, a top official of the Indian cricket board said.

India are scheduled to play four Tests and three one-day internationals in December and January on a tour reportedly worth A$300m ($193.77m) in broadcast revenue for Cricket Australia (CA).

Australia vice captain Travis Head on Thursday backed the idea of playing the entire Test series behind closed doors at Adelaide Oval, where an on-site hotel is under construction, to ensure it goes ahead amid restrictions forced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The boys would be very keen to go back to the field," Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) treasurer Arun Dhumal said in an interview.

India are scheduled to play four Tests and three one-day internationals in December and January on a tour reportedly worth A$300m ($193.77m) in broadcast revenue for Cricket Australia (CA).

"If the situation allows only one venue for all the matches, so be it. Maybe when lockdown is lifted, it would be the new normal that everyone has to follow.

"There's talk of matches without spectators. Nobody would like that, but if it comes to that and there's no other way, one may have to do that."

"It's still six-seven months down the line. We'll take the right call in the best interest of the safety and health of our boys."

BCCI had to postpone this year's Indian Premier League (IPL) due to the pandemic and the world's richest cricket board is staring at a potential $530m loss if it fails to find another window for the lucrative competition.

Sri Lanka and United Arab Emirates have offered to stage the Twenty20 competition but BCCI is not keen on shifting it.

"The Indian government has put in travel restrictions. So even if somebody makes an offer, you can't travel there. Where is the question of holding the tournament?" Dhumal said. The pandemic has also jeopardised the Twenty20 World Cup in Australia, which is set to begin in October.

Dhumal suggested that the BCCI would consider slotting IPL in the October-November window if the global tournament cannot go ahead.

"If IPL has to happen, there has to be a clear-cut window of 30-40 days," he said.

"If T20 World Cup does not happen, and there's a window available, then it would be worked out, subject to restrictions of course."

With the cricket calendar getting increasingly crammed following a series of postponements, getting foreign players for the IPL would be a major headache in any other window, he said.

"We may want our foreign players but there could be some tours happening, some bilateral series going on.

"And their availability is subject to so many conditions - whether foreign boards would allow their players to travel. A few countries may still be in lockdown.

"As of now, everyone is engaged for the T20 World Cup. If that tournament is not there, then all boards have their players available (for IPL)," Dhumal added.



India's captain Virat Kohli (centre) celebrates the dismissal of his Australian counterpart Steven Smith with his team-mates in this file photo.

NZ's Jamieson rewarded for India show with central contract

REUTERS — WELLINGTON

Towering pace bowler Kyle Jamieson has been rewarded for an impressive debut series against India earlier this year by being awarded a central contract by New Zealand Cricket (NZC) for the next 12 months.

South African-born batsman Devon Conway and left-arm spinner Ajaz Patel also received their first central contracts, NZC said in a statement yesterday.

The contracts, which include a base salary alongside usual match fees, are awarded each year to the 20 players expected to feature prominently for the national side in the next 12 months.

"It's really exciting to offer contracts to Kyle, Ajaz and Devon who have all impressed over the past 12 months," selection manager Gavin Larsen said in the statement.

"Kyle's performances against the might of India were nothing short of outstanding and at 25 years of age he's certainly got a big future.

"We see Ajaz as the incumbent test spinner at present and he'll be looking to stamp his mark on that spot after some superb efforts with the ball in the sub-continent.

"Devon's form with the bat across all three formats these past two seasons made him impossible to ignore and he's going to be a great option to add to the batting mix."

Conway, 28, will be cleared to play for the national team from late August after he completes his three-year residency requirement.

He topped the scoring charts in all three forms of cricket in New Zealand's domestic competitions last season.

The 25-year-old Jamieson, however, was New Zealand's find of the Test series against India in February and March where he used his 2.04-metre height to extract steep bounce off a length and consistently trouble the batsmen.

Jamieson took nine wickets, including his first five-wicket haul, in the test series that New Zealand won 2-0, a result that helped propel Australia above India to the top of the International Cricket Council's (ICC) Test rankings.

Limited overs specialist Colin Munro, legspinner Todd Astle and opening batsman Jeet Raval dropped off the list.

Professional cricket to resume with VPL T10 in Caribbean: Report

AFP — ST. JOHN'S

International cricketers could return to the field for the first time since March in the inaugural T10 Vincy Premier League (VPL) tournament in the Caribbean next week, according to a report yesterday.

The VPL is due to start next Friday in St Vincent and will be the first professional tournament to be played under new temporary laws, including banning the use of saliva on the ball due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The event is set to be open to fans, according to the report on the Cricinfo website, as there have been no restrictions imposed by the government of St Vincent and the Grenadines.

There will be 30 matches in total, all streamed live, with six franchise teams taking part.

West Indies internationals Kesrick Williams, Sunil Ambris and Obed McCoy are all scheduled to play.

The opening game will be the first recognised match since Karachi Kings faced the Quetta Gladiators in the Pakistan Super League on March 15.

"We have formally written to Cricket West Indies (CWI). And I expect to get a positive response from them soon," St Vincent and the Grenadines Cricket Association president Kishore Shallow told *Cricinfo* in an interview.

"No player would be allowed to use any saliva on the ball."

Shallow said that the tournament was put together after an approach by India-based sports technology company Dream 11.

Kohli, Sharma could be stranded when India resume training

AFP — NEW DELHI

The Board of Control for Cricket in India could allow outdoor training as early as next week when a further easing of the government's nationwide coronavirus lockdown is to start.

Top Indian players Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma could be left stranded in pandemic-stricken Mumbai when senior players start training again, an official has warned.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) could allow outdoor training as early as next week when a further easing of the government's nationwide coronavirus lockdown is to start.

But Mumbai, where national captain Kohli and batsman Sharma are based, is at the forefront of India's battle against the pandemic, and tough restrictions are expected to be maintained there.

"For players like Kohli and Rohit, the restrictions are there in Mumbai and might stay," BCCI treasurer Arun Dhumal said.

Mumbai has recorded almost 1,000 coronavirus deaths and accounts for more than a third of India's fatalities so far. The number of new cases is still rising.

Dhumal said that following government talk of further easing its nearly two-month-old lockdown, "some skill-based training" outdoors could be possible in other parts of India.

While international cricket and the Indian Premier League have been high-profile sporting victims of the coronavirus, Kohli and other players have been posting pictures of their indoor training and other activities on social media during the lockdown.

Dhumal said India's National Cricket Academy (NCA) in Bangalore was working on a post-lockdown plan for players which would be adapted to the level of restrictions.

"As of now we are working, given the lockdown restrictions, through apps and online modes. The coaches and support staff are regularly in touch with the players," said Dhumal.

"Everybody would be keen to hit the ground and the idea is whenever we are ready for cricket to resume, they (the players) are able to give their 100 percent."

India have a short tour of Sri Lanka scheduled for June but it is widely expected to be called off.

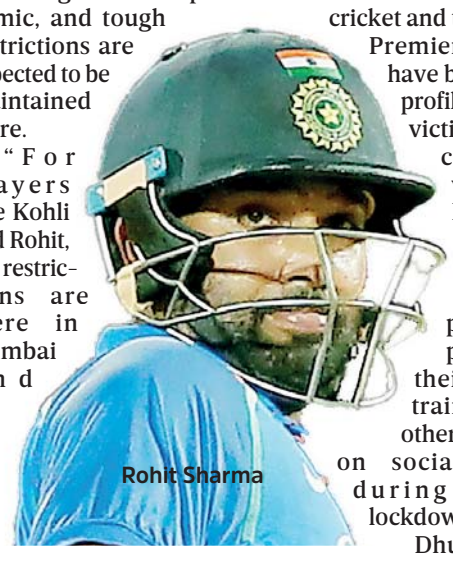
Indian athletes are also keen to resume training with many preparing for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics which has been pushed back by a year.

Sports Minister Kiren Rijiju has assured athletes that outdoor training will resume after the lockdown while taking necessary precautions amid the virus.

"We will resume practice soon but in a controlled manner," Rijiju said after a video interaction with the national hockey players.

"Those technicalities have to be drawn up by health experts in consultation with the coaches, federation officials and the government.

"I assure that we will extend all support to get our athletes back on the ground to train, but we must be careful."



Rohit Sharma



Virat Kohli

Tokyo Olympics next year may not be 'conventional', says Muto

AP — TOKYO



A security guard officer wearing a protective face mask walks past the Tokyo 2020 Olympics decoration board during the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), in Tokyo, Japan, yesterday.

Figures in the Japanese media have ranged between $2bn and $6bn, with most mounting expenses likely to be covered by government entities.

Muto spoke a day after the Switzerland-based International Olympic Committee acknowledged it would have added costs of $800m because of the postponement.

Almost two months after the Tokyo Olympics were postponed, organising committee CEO Toshiro Muto **(pictured below)** said yesterday he still could not give an estimate of how much the one-year delay will cost.

Figures in the Japanese media have ranged between $2bn and $6bn, with most mounting expenses likely to be covered by government entities.

Although he was vague about the costs and who will pay, Muto was very clear about one thing in the online news conference.

"The actual games we will have one year from now may not be the same conventional Olympic and Paralympic Games that we have come to know," he said, speaking in Japanese and translated through in interpreter.

Muto floated ideas about cuts everywhere, though the only specific target he mentioned was the torch relay.

"We are looking into every possible area," he said.

"It's time for all of us to review what are the essential things for the games. What are the must-have items?... I think we might come up with a new Olympic and Paralympic Games, something that is unique to Tokyo."



Tokyo's future still has more questions than answers. How will 11,000 Olympic athletes and 4,400 Paralympians be housed in the Athletes Village? Will the tight quarters be safe? How will they travel to Tokyo? How will they train and qualify? And what about thousands more staff and games officials? Will there be fans, or will it be a television-only show? What about millions of tickets already sold? Will there be refunds? Will a vaccine be available? Will young, healthy athletes be a priority for a vaccine?

Muto spoke a day after the Switzerland-based International Olympic Committee acknowledged it would have added costs of $800m because of the postponement. The IOC said $150m would be made available for loans to national Olympic committees and sports federations, some of which have few sources of revenue outside the games.

But the IOC gave no details of where the other $650m would go.

Muto said he didn't know, either. Or at least he wasn't saying. "As to the breakdown of how this money will be used, the IOC has said it's too early to tell," Muto said.

"So we at the organizing committee have no idea of all the details about how this money will be spent."

Soaring Olympic costs are sure to be a touchy subject as Japan, like most countries, battles a deep recession brought on by the coronavirus pandemic.

Japanese organizers and government bodies are obligated by a Host City Contract signed in 2013 to pick up most of the Olympic costs. When they were awarded the games seven years ago, Tokyo officials said the Olympics would cost just over $7bn.

Tokyo now says it is spending $12.6bn to organise the games, but a government audit report last year said it was twice that much.

All but $5.6bn is public money. Muto said organisers are still trying to guarantee that 43 venues will be available next year, hoping to keep the same event schedule when the Olympics open on July 23, 2021.

"It's going to take a bit of time," Muto said, "and that cannot be helped."

WA says clean record required for athletes seeking welfare grant amid crisis

REUTERS — LONDON

Olympic-bound professional athletes must have clean anti-doping records to be eligible for a one-off grant aimed at assisting them financially during the COVID-19 crisis, World Athletics (WA) said yesterday.

The sport's governing body said athletes will have until May 31 to register for the grant from a $500,000 fund jointly set up by World Athletics and the International Athletics Foundation to support competitors whose incomes have been hit.

The novel coronavirus outbreak, which has infected over 4.39 million people globally and caused more than 296,900 deaths, has affected the schedules of several athletics events, with the Tokyo Olympics postponed to next year.

"The IAF has allocated a substantial sum to the fund, and we hope to raise more through private donations from friends of our sport," World Athletics chief Sebastian Coe, who is chairing the group assessing applications for help, said in a statement.

"But it has become apparent the resources must be focused on athletes who are likely to be competing at the Olympic Games in Tokyo next year and are struggling to pay for basic necessities due to loss of income during the pandemic."

World Athletics said athletes who have qualified for the Tokyo Games by meeting the entry standard and those who have not had anti-doping rule violations would be eligible for grants.

They will also have to demonstrate justifiable need through "significant" loss of income in 2020 compared to 2019.

"We know this is a stressful situation for many athletes and we are trying to provide meaningful assistance... so they can continue to train for the competition season we have scheduled for August to October, and for next year's Olympics," Coe said.

Athletes ranked in the top six in their event in the world rankings, those who have finished in the top six of any Gold Label Road Race in 2019 or have earned more than $6,000 in prize money from the Diamond League last year cannot apply.

FIFA postpones Best awards ceremony scheduled on September 21

AFP — LAUSANNE

FIFA's The Best awards ceremony, scheduled to be held in Milan on September 21, has been postponed as a result of the coronavirus crisis, world football's governing body confirmed yesterday.

It is unclear if or when the ceremony will be rearranged, with a FIFA spokesperson saying that "the consequences and different alternatives are being considered".

Lionel Messi and Megan Rapinoe won the best male and female prizes last year. The duo also took the honours at the 2019 Ballon d'Or.

Milan and the Lombardy region have been the epicentre of Italy's coronavirus outbreak, one of the worst in Europe in terms of deaths and infections.

Messi prefers not to over-think risk of infection as La Liga return looms

REUTERS — BARCELONA



Lionel Messi **(pictured)** believes he is better off not thinking too much about the risk of being infected by the coronavirus as Spanish soccer clubs step up their return to activity, saying he looks forward to getting back to playing matches.

Messi and his Barcelona team mates have been back at the club's training ground conducting individual sessions since last week, following La Liga's four-phase protocol for returning to activity since it was halted in March due to the pandemic.

All 11 remaining rounds of fixtures in La Liga will take place without spectators, with President Javier Tebas saying last week that matches could start as soon as June 12.

While some players and clubs have spoken out against football returning out of fear of picking up the virus or passing it on to others, Messi said returning to matches was no riskier than leaving home for any other reason.

"There's a risk of infection everywhere, when you leave your house there's a risk, so I think we shouldn't think too much about it because if you do you won't want to go anywhere," Messi told Spanish newspaper *Mundo Deportivo* yesterday.

"But we must understand that it's essential we comply with the protocols and follow the prevention measures as much as we can. Returning to training is the first step but we shouldn't get complacent and we must take all precautions necessary."

There's a risk of infection everywhere, when you leave your house there's a risk, so I think we shouldn't think too much about it because if you do you won't want to go anywhere: Lionel Messi

Messi said he is excited about returning to matches but voiced his opposition to La Liga's proposal for teams to be quarantined together, away from their families, once matches resume.

"Personally I'm looking forward to the competition returning. We know it's going to all be very strange, without anyone in the stands, I've done it before and I found it out," said the Barca captain.

"With regards to being quarantined, the truth is we don't like the idea of being separated from our families at all but we'll have to see what the final plan is."

FIFA to choose 2023 women's World Cup hosts next month

REUTERS — BERN

The hosts for the 2023 women's World Cup will be chosen at an online meeting of the FIFA Council on June 25, the global soccer body said yesterday.

FIFA will choose between Brazil, Colombia, Japan and a joint bid from Australia and New Zealand in what it said was the "most competitive bidding process" in the event's 29-year history. None of the bidding nations have staged the event before.

The hosts were originally due to be chosen at a FIFA Council meeting in Addis Ababa in June but that was postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"FIFA remains committed to implementing the most comprehensive, objective and transparent bidding process in the history of the FIFA Women's World Cup, said FIFA general secretary Fatma Samoura.

FIFA said its evaluation report on the four bids will be published in early June. South Korea and South Africa dropped out of the race in December.

The 2023 tournament will feature 32 teams for the first time, up from 24 in France in 2019.

FIFA will choose between Brazil, Colombia, Japan and a joint bid from Australia and New Zealand in what it said was the "most competitive bidding process" in the event's 29-year history.

Villarreal and Getafe deny match-fixing

REUTERS — MADRID

Spanish soccer clubs Villarreal and Getafe have denied any wrongdoing after national media reported yesterday that police are investigating possible match-fixing in a 2-2 draw between the two clubs in La Liga last year.

"Villarreal and its first team wish to show their absolute rejection of the accusations made today and categorically deny being involved in any way in fixing the game against Getafe on the final day of last season," said a club statement.

La Liga confirmed it had opened a confidential dossier as part of Operation Oikos but added that details of the case would not be made public until it goes to trial.

"As it has done on repeated occasions, the club condemns any conduct that damages the essence of sport and competition and stresses that the values of transparency, ethics, integrity and fair play are fundamental to its philosophy."

Getafe also released a statement saying the club "wish to categorically deny any involvement with this matter and this type of conduct".

Newspaper *El Pais* reported that the match was being looked at as part of Operation Oikos, which was launched last year and led to 11 people being arrested on suspicion of forming a match-fixing group to profit from betting on games.

La Liga confirmed it had opened a confidential dossier as part of Operation Oikos but added that details of the case would not be made public until it goes to trial.

The court based in the city of Huesca that El Pais said was investigating the case could not be reached for comment.

"Operation Oikos came about due to an accusation by La Liga, which has joined the case as a private plaintiff, and will take all legal measures necessary to clarify the facts that are under investigation," La Liga said in a statement.

Getafe had to beat Villarreal to stand a chance of qualifying for Europe's elite Champions League club competition ahead of Valencia. Villarreal had nothing to play for.

Valencia's 2-0 win at Real Valladolid on the same day, however, meant that in the event Getafe could not have qualified for the Champions League even if they had beaten Villarreal.

Five former Osasuna directors and two former Real Betis players were given jail sentences last month following an investigation into match-fixing in 2013 and 2014, the first ever convictions for sporting corruption in Spanish football.